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Title of the Invention

**VIRTUAL ETHERNET PORTS WITH
AUTOMATED ROUTER PORT EXTENSION**

Inventor

Jean-Lou Dupont

VIRTUAL ETHERNET PORTS WITH AUTOMATED ROUTER PORT EXTENSION

This application claims the benefit under 35 U.S.C. § 119(e) to copending U.S.

Provisional Patent Application No. 60/244991 entitled "Virtual Ethernet Ports With Automated Router Port Extension" and filed on November 1, 2000. This application also incorporates

5 copending U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/244991 by reference as if fully rewritten here.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention is directed toward the field of data communication networks. In particular, the invention is directed to a system and method for providing a high-speed interface between a user and a wide area network.

2. Description of the Related Art

Many computer users have found that there are many advantages to linking computers together through a local area network ("LAN"). The most common type of LAN used is the Ethernet. The use of a LAN allows multiple users, among other things, to share programs, files, data, and to communicate using methods such as e-mail.

With the growth of the internet, many computer users have also found that there are many advantages to having access to the internet or some other wide area network ("WAN"). An early option for providing WAN access was the provision of a separate communication channel to the outside world for each computer seeking WAN access. Modems and telephone lines are typically used with this option. When using this method, for example, a computer seeking internet access would gain internet access through an Internet Service Provider ("ISP") via the computer's dedicated modem and telephone line. The ISP would complete the internet connection by providing the computer with access to one of the ISP's internet router ports on a

shared basis with other users. This access method, however, is highly inefficient, slow and expensive, particularly for computers linked together via a LAN.

To improve upon the earlier access methods, LAN administrators have provided computers with WAN access through non-dedicated communication channels so that resources
5 such as modems and telephone lines, could be shared and, as a result, used more efficiently. To further improve access, the use of higher speed access media to the ISP, such as the use of DSL lines or fiber optic connections, have been proposed. The use of these higher speed access media, however, could make the cost of access for the users quite expensive. Wireless interfaces or dial-up modems could be used to reduce costs but these access means would yield a much
10 slower connection.

Therefore, there remains a need in this art for a high speed, low cost system for providing WAN access to multiple users. There remains a more particular need for a high speed, low cost system for providing WAN access having an interface that is not complex for the user to
15 implement.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention further improves upon the access methods noted above and provides a high speed, low cost system and method for providing access to a wide area network. The present invention provides a system that utilizes a high speed communication network to
20 provide a user with high speed access to a WAN access device. The high speed communication network is capable of providing multiple users or LANs with a high speed data communication path to a WAN access device via a high speed access medium, such as a fiber optic network, on a shared basis so that the cost per user for use of the high speed data communication path to the WAN access device is reduced. The system includes an access engine that adds value to the

operational aspects of bringing up the high speed internet connection. The access engine provides an extended router port at the user's interface to the system thereby minimizing interface complexities for the user, the WAN access service provider, and the carrier that provides the high speed communication network.

5 The present invention provides many advantages over the presently known communication systems for providing WAN access. Not all of these advantages are simultaneously required to practice the invention as claimed, and the following list is merely illustrative of the types of benefits that may be provided, alone or in combination, by the present invention. These advantages include: (1) the use of a high speed communication system such as
10 a fiber optic network or SONET/SDH network to transmit data between the user equipment and the WAN access device; (2) connecting multiple users to the WAN access device thereby reducing the cost per user for the high speed access to the WAN device; (3) providing a system in which the user does not have to reconfigure its equipment in order to send or receive data packets that are transmitted over a fiber optic or SONET/SDH network; (4) providing a system
15 in which the WAN access device does not have to be reconfigured to send data packets that are compatible with a user's communication protocol; and (5) increasing the 'fan-in' capacity of Ethernet interfaces to admit more customers to 'share' Internet access and providing an efficient way of providing Internet access to a multitude of customers through an Ethernet interface using the Automated Router Port Extension.

20 In accordance with one aspect of the present invention a communication system is provided that provides a plurality of user networks with a high speed link to a wide area network. The system comprises a transport network having a plurality of network nodes coupled together by one or more data communication paths, wherein at least one of said network nodes comprises

an access device and at least one of said network nodes comprises a concentrator device. The access device includes a plurality of router port extension functional units wherein each router port extension functional unit is coupled to one of the user networks. The router port extension functional unit are operable to receive an upstream data packet from one of the user networks, 5 operable to frame the received upstream data packet into a format compatible for transmission on the transport network, and operable to forward the converted upstream data packet onto at least one of the data communication paths on the transport network. The router port extension functional unit also is operable to receive a downstream data packet from at least one of the data communication paths on the transport network, operable to frame the received downstream data packet into a format compatible for receipt by the user network, and operable to forward the 10 converted downstream data packet to the user network. The concentrator device is coupled to a wide area network access device. The concentrator device is operable to receive network data packets from at least one of said data communication paths and operable to forward the received network data packets to the wide area network access device. The concentrator device is also operable to receive data packets from the wide area network access device and operable to 15 forward the data packets from said wide area network access device to at least one of said data communication paths.

In one embodiment, each router port extension functional unit has an associated virtual port and all of the virtual ports are multiplexed to a single LAN communication port. In another 20 embodiment the system includes a LAN switch device. The LAN switch device includes a first port for providing a coupling path to the LAN communication port of said access device. The LAN switch also includes a plurality of customer LAN ports wherein each of the customer LAN

ports is operable to provide a coupling point for a connection between one of the user LANs and one of the router port extension functional units.

In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, a network node device for use in a transport network and for providing a plurality of user networks with an interface to the transport network is provided. The network node device comprises a plurality of router port extension functional units. Each router port extension functional unit is coupled to one of the user networks. Each router port extension functional unit comprises a virtual channel agent and a LAN agent. The virtual channel agent is operable to receive a first data packet from the transport network and is operable to transmit a second data packet to the transport network. The LAN agent is operable to receive the second data packet from the user network and is operable to transmit the first data packet to the user network.

In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, a method for extending a plurality of sub-interfaces of a router port of a wide area network access device to a plurality of user networks using a transport network is provided. The transport network comprises a plurality of network nodes coupled together by one or more data communication paths wherein at least one of the network nodes comprises an access device. The access device includes a plurality of router port extension functional units wherein each router port extension functional unit is coupled to one of the user networks. Each router port extension functional unit comprises a virtual channel agent and a LAN agent. Each router port extension functional units has an associated virtual port, and all of the virtual ports are multiplexed to a single LAN communication port. The method comprises the steps of receiving, with the virtual channel agent of a first router port extension functional unit, a downstream data packet from the router port; decapsulating, in the first router port extension functional unit, the received downstream

data packet so that the transport network encapsulation format is removed from the received data packet; transmitting, with the LAN agent of the first router port extension functional unit, an ARP-like message over a first user LAN requesting the address for the recipient of the received downstream data packet; receiving, with the LAN agent of the first router port extension

- 5 functional unit, an ARP-like response from a device on the first user LAN; encapsulating, in the first router port extension functional unit, the decapsulated data packet into a LAN encapsulation format data packet using the address received from the ARP-like response as the destination address for the data packet; transmitting, with the LAN agent of the first router port extension functional unit, the LAN encapsulated data packet onto said first user LAN; and repeating the foregoing steps using a second user LAN and a second router port extension functional unit.

- 10 In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, a method for extending a plurality of sub-interfaces of a router port of a wide area network access device to a plurality of user networks using a transport network is provided. The transport network comprises a plurality of network nodes coupled together by one or more data communication paths wherein
- 15 at least one of the network nodes comprises an access device. The access device includes a plurality of router port extension functional units wherein each router port extension functional unit is coupled to one of the user networks. Each router port extension functional unit comprises a virtual channel agent and a LAN agent. Each router port extension functional units has an associated virtual port, and all of the virtual ports are multiplexed to a single LAN
- 20 communication port. The method comprises the steps of receiving, with the LAN agent of a first router port extension functional unit, a first upstream data packet from a first user LAN; decapsulating, in the first router port extension functional unit, the received first data packet so that the LAN encapsulation format is removed from said received first data packet;

encapsulating, in the first router port extension functional unit, the first decapsulated data packet into the transport network encapsulation format; transmitting, with the virtual channel agent of the first router port extension functional unit, the first transport network encapsulated data packet onto the transport network; and repeating the foregoing steps with a second user LAN using a
5 second router port extension functional unit.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention will become more apparent from the following description when read in conjunction with the accompanying drawings wherein:

Fig. 1 is a schematic drawing of a communication system that provides a fiber extended
10 router port;

Fig. 2 is a more detailed schematic drawing of a communication system that provides multiple LANs with access to a WAN;

Fig. 3 is a schematic drawing of a ring network used in a preferred embodiment of the invention;

15 Fig. 4 is an alternate view of a communication system that provides multiple LANs with access to a WAN;

Fig. 5 is a diagram illustrating multiple Ethernet data framing formats;

Fig. 6 is a schematic drawing of a preferred Protocol engine;

20 Figs. 7a, 7b, and 7c are schematic illustrations of alternate LAN configurations that can be used with the present invention;

Fig. 8 is a flow chart illustrating a preferred process of downstream packet processing;

Fig. 9 is a schematic drawing of system operation during a transition period;

Fig. 10 is a diagram illustrating the connection of multiple user network via a single network node having a plurality of router port extension functional elements; and

Fig. 11 is a diagram illustrating the use of virtual channels paths with a network node having a plurality of router port extension functional elements.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

System Description

5 Referring now to the drawings, figure 1 sets forth a schematic drawing of a preferred embodiment of a communication system 2 according to the present invention. The communication system 2 provides a user or a user's local area network 3 ("LAN") with access to the internet or some other wide area network ("WAN"). In the embodiment shown, a LAN 3 is provided with internet access through a fiber optic system 4. The fiber optic system 4 provides a
10 connection between the user LAN 3 and an internet access device such as an internet backbone router 5 ("BR"). The BR 5 has a number of ports (not shown) with internet protocol ("IP") addresses assigned thereto. Internet access is achieved through accessing the ports on the BR 5.

The present invention simplifies the access by providing a fiber extended router port 6. To the LAN 3, an assigned port from the BR 5 is made to appear to be physically located at the
15 LAN's interface 6 with the fiber optic system 4. The provision of this fiber extended router port 6 at the LAN's interface, thereby, simplifies the interface requirements for devices 7 on the LAN 3 such as a LAN router ("LR") 7a or a LAN Host ("Host") 7b. With the present invention, the LAN devices 7 communicate with the fiber extended router port 6 using their existing LAN protocol. The LAN devices 7 aren't required to change the format they use locally on the LAN
20 to exchange data nor do they need additional programming in order to transmit data packets to or receive data packets from the BR 5 even though a portion of the communication path the data must travel includes fiber optic networks multiplexers and other devices. In addition, with the present invention, the interface for the internet access device 5 is not made more complex. The internet access device 5 will not require modification or additional programming to

accommodate the various data packet formats used on the various LANs the internet access device **5** may provides internet access for.

The preferred user LAN **3** is an Ethernet LAN but other LAN types such as token ring, FDDI, etc., could be used. LAN Hosts **7b** preferably are personal computers (“PCs”) but optionally could be servers or other computer or communication equipment. LAN router **7a** preferably comprises computer or communication hardware that forwards data from or to other computer or communication equipment on the LAN **3**. LAN router **7a** optionally could be coupled to other subnets (not shown) on the user’s premises which interconnect other LAN hosts (not shown).

Figure 2 sets forth a more detailed view of an exemplary communication system **2** for providing a plurality of user LANs **3** with access to the internet or other WAN via a fiber optic system. The exemplary communication system **2** includes a fiber optic system that preferably is arranged in a ring network **10** and more preferably in a Synchronous Optical Network (“SONET”) or SDH ring. The communication system **2** also includes a plurality of network nodes **12a**, **12b**, **12c**, & **12d** that are coupled together in the SONET/SDH ring **10**, a plurality of local or user LANs **3a**, **3b** & **3c** that are coupled to the network nodes **12a**, **12b** & **12c**, respectively, preferably via fiber optic cables **15**, and an internet or WAN access device **5** such as an internet backbone router (“BR”) coupled to network node **12d**.

Figure 3 sets forth a system diagram of a preferred SONET/SDH ring **20** for use in a communication system that practices the present invention. The SONET/SDH ring **20** includes a plurality of network nodes **22**, labeled **N0-N3**, coupled in a ring structure by one or more communication paths **24A**, **24B**. As shown in FIG. 3, the two paths **24A**, **24B** transport SONET/SDH data streams (many packets/cells) in opposite directions about the ring (*i.e.*, east

and west). The communication paths **24A**, **24B** are preferably fiber optic connections (in SONET/SDH), but could, alternatively be electrical paths or even wireless connections (in other types of ring networks). In the case of a fiber optic connection, paths **24A**, **24B** could be implemented on a single fiber **24**, on dual fibers **24A**, **24B**, or some other combination of connections. Each network node **22** is preferably coupled to two other network nodes **22** in the ring structure **20**. For example, network node **N0** is coupled to network nodes **N1** and **N3**. The coupling between the nodes in FIG. 1 is two-way, meaning that each node **22** transmits and receives data (packets/cells) to and from each of the two other nodes **22** to which it is connected. Each network node **22** includes at least two transmitter/receiver interfaces, one for each connection to another node **22**. The network nodes **22** could be many types of well-known network devices, such as add-drop multiplexers (“ADMs”), switches, routers, cross-connects or other types of devices. The devices **22** shown in FIG. 3 are preferably ADMs. An ADM is a three terminal device having a local add/drop interface, an upstream network node interface, and a downstream network node interface. These ADMs **22** are coupled to local nodes **26**, and are used to add packets/cells from the local nodes **26** to the SONET/SDH data stream, and conversely to drop packets from the SONET/SDH data stream to the local nodes **26**. A system and method for packet transport in a SONET/SDH ring network and an exemplary ADM is described in more detail in commonly-assigned United States Patent Application S/N 09/378,844 (“the ‘844 application”), which is incorporated herein by reference. For more information on SONET/SDH formats, line-speeds, and theory of operation, see John Bellamy, *Digital Telephony*, 2d Edition (1991), pp. 403-425.

The network nodes **22** shown in FIG. 3 may be logically connected by a plurality of virtual paths that coexist on the physical network connection(s) **24**. Virtual paths are also known

as logical paths or “pipes.” For example, although there is only one physical connection from node **N0** to node **N1** to node **N2**, there may be numerous virtual paths between these nodes, such as one virtual path from **N0** to **N1**, another from **N0** to **N2** and another from **N1** to **N2**. Each virtual path may include a plurality of virtual channels, wherein each virtual channel transports packets (or cells) formatted according to the SONET/SDH SPE. The use of virtual paths in SONET/SDH ring networks is described in more detail in commonly-assigned United States Patent Application S/N 09/324,244 (“the ‘244 application”), which also is incorporated herein by reference.

In the exemplary communication system **2** shown in figure 2, the network nodes **12a**, **12b** & **12c** are access nodes. The network devices that make up access nodes **12a**, **12b** & **12c** each include an access device or access card (“AC”) **14**. Each access card **14** is operable to transfer data packets between a user’s equipment on a LAN **3** and other nodes **12** on the ring network **10**. The access cards **14** of the present invention may physically reside within a network device of the SONET/SDH ring **10** or alternatively may be coupled to a network device.

The network node **12d** of the exemplary communication system **2** is an internet gateway node and the network device that makes up the gateway node **12d** includes a multiplexor device or concentrator card (“CC”) **16**. The CC **16** functions as a switch that multiplexes data packets transmitted by the access nodes **12a**, **12b** & **12c** onto a single data transmission channel **18** for further routing to the internet access device **5**. The CC **16** also functions as a switch for forwarding data packets received over the data transmission channel **18** from the internet access device **5** to one or more access nodes **12a**, **12b** or **12c**.

Router ports are also very expensive. Because of the expense and high bandwidth capability, router ports have been configured for shared use between multiple virtual circuits and

sub-interfaces. The concentrator card 16 facilitates the shared use of a router port and has a two-fold role. The concentrator card 16 merges the data from the various LANs 3 and access cards 14 on the ring network into a single pipe for forwarding to the single router port of the BR 5 to which the concentrator card 16 is coupled. In merging the data, the concentrator card 16 couples the data to different interfaces within the router port. The concentrator card's 16 second task is to take data from the BR 5, packet by packet, and forwards the data to the various access nodes 12 on the ring network.

Protocol Engine

Each access card 14 includes at least one protocol engine 30, as shown in figure 4, for providing a fiber extended router port 6 to a LAN 3. The protocol engine 30 provides a permanent address for use by the LAN devices 7 when transmitting data packets to the WAN. The protocol engine 30 reformats data packets from the LAN devices 7 and transmits the reformatted data packets over the ring 10 through the concentrator interface of CC 16 to a sub-interface of BR 5. The protocol engine 30 also receives data packets from a sub-interface of BR 5 through the concentrator interface and reformats those data packets to the format used on the LAN 3. The protocol engine 30 addresses at least three main architectural issues: encapsulation, maximum transfer unit ("MTU"), and address resolution.

On a user LAN 3, a number of different data formats could be used for framing the data packets traveling across the user LAN. For example on an Ethernet LAN, framing formats such as the Ethernet 2, the IEEE802.3, the IEEE802.3+SNAP, or others could be used, as illustrated in figure 5. The protocol engine 30 simplifies the interface between an internet gateway device 5 and LAN devices 7 by handling the data encapsulation needed to transfer data between them. The protocol engine 30 makes the interface requirements for an internet gateway device 5 less complex by framing data packets from the gateway device 5 into the data framing format used on

the user LAN 3 so that the gateway device 5 does not have to perform this function. The protocol engine also makes the interface for the LAN devices 7 less complex by performing the data packet framing and de-framing necessary for sending data over and receiving data from a SONET/SDH ring 10.

5 A preferred way in which the protocol engine 30 handles the encapsulation of data traveling to and from the user LAN 3 is by being liberal in what the protocol engine 30 accepts as Ethernet frames and by being conservative in how the protocol engine 30 forwards Ethernet frames. For example, the protocol engine 30 can accept all Ethernet encapsulation types from the user LAN 3 and only provide one encapsulation type to the user LAN 3.

10 MTU becomes an issue when data is transferred between different networks. The maximum data packet size for each network may differ. For example, Ethernet 2 encapsulation allows for 1500 octets of data packets and IEEE 802.3 SNAP networks are limited to 1492 octets. The protocol engine 30 is capable of handling messages received from the BR 5 that are too big for the destination user LAN 3.

15 The protocol engine 30 has two options when the MTU of the BR 5 exceeds the MTU of the user LAN 3. Preferably, when a data packet received from the BR 5 is too large and cannot be encapsulated into a frame for the user LAN 3, the protocol engine 30 will fragment the IP datagram to make it conform to the Ethernet layer framing, i.e., divide the data packet into smaller chunks that can be encapsulated into frames for transmission to the user LAN 3.

20 Optionally, the protocol engine 30 can make use of the ICMP 'Datagram Too Big' message. Under this approach, if a data packet is received that is too large, the protocol engine 30 discards the entire data packet and returns an ICMP 'Datagram Too Big' message to the source of the data

packet. The protocol engine **30** analyzes the 'DF' bit ("Don't Fragment") in the data packet header to determine whether this is the preferred action to take.

Address Resolution is another task that the protocol engine **30** undertakes to simplify the interface between an internet gateway device **5** and LAN devices **7**. When encapsulating data packets transmitted to the user LAN **3**, the protocol engine **30** encapsulates the data packets in an Ethernet frame having the proper source & destination MAC addresses. The source MAC address is fixed to the one associated with the protocol engine **30**. The destination MAC address is dynamically resolved. For unicast data packets, the protocol engine **30** preferably uses the ARP process.

A preferred implementation of the protocol engine **30** is shown in figure 6. The preferred protocol engine **30** includes a user LAN port **40** for interfacing with the user's LAN and a virtual channel port **42a** & **42b** for interfacing with the ring network **10** and completing the virtual path between the router **5**, concentrator card **16**, and access card **14**. The LAN port **40** is the fiber extended router port **6** of the present invention. The preferred LAN port **40** has an Ethernet transmit data port connection **40a** and an Ethernet receive data port connection **40b**. The protocol engine **30** also has a downstream path and an upstream path for transferring data. In the downstream data path, data flows downstream from the backbone router **5** through the ring network **10** through the protocol engine **30** in the access card **14** to the user LAN **3**. In the upstream data path, data flows from the user LAN **3** through the protocol engine **30** through the ring network **10** to the backbone router **5**.

The preferred protocol engine **30** also comprises a Virtual Channel ("VC") agent **44** and an Ethernet Agent **46**. These two agents convert data packets traveling downstream in the

SONET/SDH format to the Ethernet data format used on the LAN. These two agents also convert Ethernet data packets traveling upstream from the LAN to a SONET/SDH data format.

In particular, the VC Agent **44** is responsible for performing the functions required to transmit data to and to receive data from a virtual channel. The preferred VC Agent **44** comprises a VC de-framer **43** and a VC framer **45**. The VC De-framer **43** is responsible for removing the overhead that is added to a data packet that has been framed or encapsulated to travel over a SONET/SDH ring. The VC Framer **45**, on the other hand, is responsible for encapsulating or adding overhead to data packets that are going upstream over a SONET/SDH ring.

The preferred Ethernet Agent **46** performs the required functions to comply with a standard IEEE802.3 Ethernet Port such as preamble generation/detection, FCS generation/detection, frame length checking, etc. The preferred Ethernet Agent **46** comprises a MAC Filter **47**, an Encapsulation Detector **48**, and an Ethernet Framer **49**. The MAC filter **47** filters Ethernet messages passing over the user LAN based on the destination MAC address in each Ethernet packet. The MAC filter **47** only accepts packets destined to the MAC address associated with the protocol engine **30** and broadcast/multicast packets. The encapsulation detector **48** detects the encapsulation format used on the LAN **3** and instructs the Ethernet framer **49** on which encapsulation format to use when sending out packets. The Ethernet Framer **49** constructs the Ethernet frame surrounding the IP packet to be sent out of the protocol engine **30** onto the LAN **3**.

The preferred protocol engine **30** also includes a router port extension **60** that includes a router agent **50**. The router agent **50** performs a limited routing function such as the ARP table function and IRDP snooping, etc. The preferred protocol engine **30** does not perform routing

table computation. When the LAN 3 includes a LAN router 7a, the router agent forwards all packets received by the protocol engine 30 that are not directly addressed to a LAN host 7b to the LAN router 7a.

The router port extension 60 in the preferred protocol engine 30 also includes an address resolution protocol agent 51 ("ARP") and an ARP database 52. The ARP agent 51 initiates 'ARP request' Ethernet broadcast messages for populating the ARP database 52 and responds to Ethernet 'ARP request' broadcast messages with 'ARP replies' Ethernet messages when asked to perform binding for the IP address associated with the protocol engine's 30 Ethernet port. The ARP database 52 houses the Ethernet MAC address to IP address mapping table for devices 7 on the LAN 3.

The router port extension 60 in the preferred protocol engine 30 includes an IRDP ("ICMP Router Discovery Protocol") agent 53. (ICMP refers to "Internet Control Message Protocol.") The IRDP Agent snoops the protocol 'ICMP Router Advertisement' message. When this message is required from the upstream interface 40b, the IRDP agent 53 is alerted of the availability of a LAN router 7a on the LAN 3, and passes this information on to the router agent 50. When an ICMP Router Advertisement message is received from the downstream interface 42a (from the backbone router 5), the IRDP agent is informed of the IP address assigned to the protocol engine 30 by BR 5.

The router port extension 60 in the preferred protocol engine 30 further includes a RIP (Routing Information Protocol) agent 54 which snoops messages from the upstream interface 40b. When a RIP message is snooped, the RIP agent 54 is informed of the availability of a LAN router 7a on the LAN 3, which the RIP agent 54 passes on to the router agent 50.

The router port extension **60** in the preferred protocol engine **30** also includes protocol muxes **55** and a protocol demux **56**. The protocol mux multiplexes packets from different protocol agents. The protocol demux **56** demultiplexes packets from the Ethernet input stream and sends them to the appropriate agents within protocol engine **30**. In particular, ARPs, RIPs & IRDP packets are snooped from the input and copies are sent to the appropriate agents inside the protocol engine **30**.

The operation of the preferred protocol engine **30** will be described next. The VC port **42** is connected through a virtual path to the concentrator card **16**, and the concentrator card **14d** is coupled to the internet access device or backbone router **5**. In the downstream direction, the backbone router **5** transmits IRDP messages that are received by the protocol engine **30**. Through IRDP messages, the backbone router **5** advertises the IP address that it has assigned to a virtual channel ("VC"). The protocol engine **30** listens to or snoops the IRDP messages for the IP address assigned to its VC and uses that address. The protocol engine **30** has a uniquely assigned IEEE Ethernet MAC address assigned by the manufacturer.

Since the protocol engine **30** has both a MAC address and an IP address, it can function as an Ethernet router port on the LAN **3**. To send a message over the internet, a LAN device **7** sends an Ethernet data packet having an IP data packet embedded therein addressed to the protocol engine **30** using the protocol engine's MAC address. The protocol engine **30** then frames the data to a format for transmission over the optical ring network **10** and forwards the IP packet through its assigned VC to the backbone router **5**.

To determine the protocol engine's MAC address, the host **8** can broadcast an ARP message over the LAN to the LAN's gateway IP address. The protocol engine, since it occupies

the gateway IP address, sends an ARP reply message with its MAC address. The LAN device 7 remembers the protocol engine's MAC address for future routing of IP data packets.

Through the use of the present system, the backbone router 5 does not need to know the Ethernet addresses of a LAN host 7b to send IP data packets to it. The backbone router 5 merely sends data packets to virtual channels. The protocol engine 30 then forwards the IP data packet sent to its virtual channel to the proper recipient LAN host 7b. The protocol engine 30 binds the MAC addresses on the LAN 3 and the IP addresses that are coming down from the backbone router 5.

When an IP packet coming downstream from the backbone router 5 to the LAN 3 is received by the protocol engine 30, the protocol engine 30 de-frames the data packet to strip off the overhead from the optical ring network transmission and frames the data packet as an Ethernet data packet addressed to a host's MAC address on the LAN. Figure 8 illustrates the process the protocol engine 30 performs to determine the MAC address to send the data packet to. If the protocol engine 30 does not know the recipient's MAC address, the protocol engine 30 issues an ARP request over the LAN 3 for the MAC address of the recipient host. The proper host 7b replies with its MAC address. That MAC address is stored in the ARP database. In one implementation, the protocol engine 30 then frames the IP packet as an Ethernet packet and transmits the packet to the MAC address associated with the recipient host. In another implementation, the protocol engine 30 discards the original data packet and awaits the re-transmission of the data packet before it frames the IP packet and transmits it. In cases where no recipient responds to the ARP request, the protocol engine 30 optionally may send the packet to the LAN router 7a, if one exists.

To determine the IP protocol address and MAC address of the LAN router on the user LAN 3, the protocol engine 30 uses the source IP and MAC addresses in the RIP advertisement message and/or the IRDP advertisement message.

Figure 9 illustrates the process the protocol engine 30 performs if the ARP database 52 does not reflect the current user LAN 3 subnet topology during transition periods (such as during a system boot-up). During such a period, the protocol engine 30 will send some downstream data packets to the LR 7a that were intended for hosts 7b on the directly attached subnet. The LR 7a, in turn, forwards the data packets to the proper hosts 7b. The transition periods, however, will be temporary because all hosts 7b are required to refresh their ARP tables.

In the downstream direction within the protocol engine 30, the VC agent 44 receives data packets at the VC port 42. The VC de-framer 43 strips off the overhead that was added for transmission across the virtual channel. The resulting IP packet is forwarded to the router agent 50. The router agent 50 forwards packets destined to LAN hosts 7b to the protocol mux 55 and IRDP messages to the IRDP agent. The protocol mux 55 forwards data packets to the Ethernet framer 49. The Ethernet framer 49 formats the data packet using the encapsulation format used on the LAN 3.

In the upstream direction, Ethernet data packets from the LAN 3 are read by the MAC filter 47. The protocol engine 30 discards data packets other than IP and ARP coming upstream. If the data packet is addressed to the protocol engine 30, the data packet is further processed. The MAC filter 47 strips off the Ethernet overhead and passes the resultant IP data packet to the VC framer 45 via the protocol demux 56 and the protocol mux 55. The VC framer 45 frames the data packet for transmission across the SONET/SDH network 10. Also, in the upstream direction, the Ethernet agent 46 via the encapsulation detector 48 snoops Ethernet data packets to

determine the type of Ethernet encapsulation used on the LAN. The Ethernet encapsulation format information is shared with the Ethernet framer 49 so that the Ethernet framer 49 can properly frame Ethernet packets in the downstream path.

The protocol engine 30 of the present invention is capable of operation with a variety of different LAN configurations. For example, the protocol engine 30 can interface with a LAN router, which in turn interfaces with the LAN, as shown in figure 7a. Other examples include the use of the protocol engine 30 on a flat user LAN as shown in figure 7b and the protocol engine 30 interfacing with Proxy/NAT box and a mail gateway, the proxy/Nat box in turn interfacing with the user as shown in figure 7c. The present invention can also be used on other LAN configurations not shown.

Multiplexed Ethernet Ports

In another embodiment of the present invention, as shown in figure 10, SONET/SDH access equipment 62 is provided at a SONET/SDH network node for providing multiple customers with fiber extended router ports. The SONET/SDH access equipment 62 includes a plurality of multiple router port extension ("RPE") 60 functional units. Each RPE 60 is capable of establishing a separate virtual channel through the ring 10 and the concentrator interface of CC 16 to a sub-interface of BR 5. Each RPE 60 is operable to receive data packets from a sub-interface of BR 5 and to reformat those data packets to the format used on a connected LAN for forwarding to the LAN. The RPEs 60 are also operable to reformat data packets received from the connected LANs and to transmit the reformatted data packets over the ring 10 to a sub-interface of BR 5. In addition, each RPE 60 has an associated Virtual Port ("VP") 64. The RPEs 60 and their associated VPs 64 are multiplexed to a single Ethernet physical connection 66 for connection to multiple user or customer LANs.

Multiple customers are provided with a customer port ("CP") 68 at the customer's physical location preferably through the use of Ethernet equipment 70. The Ethernet Equipment 70 includes an Ethernet physical connection 72 for connection, preferably through an Ethernet cable 74, to the Ethernet physical connection 66 on the SONET/SDH access equipment 62. The Ethernet Equipment 70 further includes multiple customer physical connections 76 for connection, preferably via Ethernet cables 78, to CPs 68. The Ethernet Equipment 70 multiplexes multiple customers via Ethernet physical connection 72 to the Ethernet physical connection 66 on the SONET/SDH access equipment 62. The Ethernet equipment 70 preferably is an Ethernet switch with VLAN capabilities such as the CISCO Catalyst switch or the 3COM Superstack switch.

The present invention adds a VLAN to the router port extension thereby lowering the cost of the high speed link. Each customer has its own VLAN Id and is provided with a CP 68. Each CP 68 is mapped to a VP 64 and a RPE 60. Standard "VLAN tagging," as defined by IEEE802.1Q, and virtual channels are preferably used to map each particular customer traffic flow as illustrated in figure 11. Each VP 68 is addressable by a unique Ethernet MAC address for reaching the RPE service 60. Each RPE 60 has a unique IP address. The system preferably uses ARP protocol for binding.

Having described in detail the preferred embodiments of the present invention, including preferred modes of operation, it is to be understood that this invention and operation could be constructed and carried out with different elements and steps. The preferred embodiments are presented only by way of example and are not meant to limit the scope of the present invention, which is defined by the following claims.